

Wildlife Express

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PRONGHORN



Pronghorn Photo: CC-BY Idaho Fish and Game

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ANTELOPE OR PRONGHORN?



Pronghorn Photo: CC-BY Idaho Fish and Game

Have you seen a pronghorn in Idaho? If you did, you were most likely not in the northern part of our state. Pronghorn are animals that like wide open spaces.

They are usually found on grasslands and shrubby areas where the plants don't get very tall. Pronghorn love the sagebrush in southern Idaho. This is their main source of food in the winter. In the summer, they will also eat soft stemmed plants, like wildflowers. They don't like to eat much grass.

You may also hear people call pronghorn "antelope". Pronghorn may look like the antelope that roam the African plains, but they are really very different animals. Pronghorn are in the family Antilocapridae (an-til-o-CAP-ri-day). They are the only member of this family. They have no close relatives.

Pronghorn are beautiful animals. Their upper bodies are pale tan to reddish-tan. Their sides, bellies, insides of the legs and rump are white. They have two broad white bands across their throats. Both the males and females have horns, but the females' horns are short. They rarely grow longer than four inches. Males' horns are longer, being 12 to 20 inches long with a forward-pointing short branch called a "prong." This is what gives pronghorn their name. Females usually don't have prongs. Something else males have are black cheek patches. Pronghorn are small compared to other hoofed animals. The

males weigh between 90 to 140 pounds; females weigh between 75 to 105 pounds.

Pronghorn are the fastest animals in North America. They can run 45 miles-per-hour over a long period of time! But that doesn't mean they don't have predators. Coyotes eat more pronghorn babies than any other animal. Bobcats are also predators that might catch a young pronghorn.

Catching a healthy adult pronghorn is no easy feat. They have excellent hearing and a good sense of smell. But their eyesight is amazing! Pronghorns' eyeballs are about one and one-half inches in diameter. That's the size of a horse's eye! Pronghorn can see something moving when it is up to four miles away! You might say they have built-in binoculars. Although pronghorns can detect a moving object miles away, they may ignore a person standing still just 50 feet away. Something needs to move for a pronghorn to see it.

When pronghorn spot danger, they have a way to warn other pronghorn. They stick up the white hairs on their rumps. On a bright day, the signal may be seen for miles. This is a cue for other pronghorn to do what they do best – run!

Keep an eye out for pronghorn. They have been known to be playful at times. Pronghorn have even raced vehicles driving on roads through their habitat.

GROWING UP PRONGHORN



Pronghorn does (females) might have their first baby (fawn) when they are about one and one-half years old. Bucks (males) are usually around three years old before they breed.

In mid-summer, breeding males stake out territories. They mark their territories by rubbing scent glands on the sides of their cheeks and necks on plants and by making loud snorts. They will also paw at the ground to tell other males to stay away. They will defend their territories from all other males, but females can travel between the males' territories freely. At this time, the bucks start to gather groups, or harems, of females. One buck might have as many as 20 does in his harem. In late summer and early fall, bucks start to show-off for the does. They have mock battles. Sometimes bucks even challenge an imaginary rival!

Does are pregnant for about 250 days. Young pronghorn are born in May or June. First-time mothers usually have one fawn, but after that they usually have twins.

Newborn pronghorn weigh about as much as a human baby, between five to nine pounds. Fawns have a gray coat until they are about three months old. The gray coat helps the fawns camouflage, or hide, from danger. They have no odor and will lie

motionless for hours while their mothers are away eating. Does return to nurse their young three or four times a day. Fawns start nibbling on plants when they are about a week old. They are weaned at about four months of age.

Pronghorn fawns are most vulnerable during their first two months of life. At this age, pronghorn can run but not as quickly as adults. Once they get past this risky stage of life, a pronghorn might live to be 15 years old.



BUILT FOR SPEED



If a pronghorn and a cheetah were in a race, which animal would win?

The cheetah is a faster sprinter. It would win in a short-distance race, but the pronghorn would win a long-distance race. It would still be going long after the cheetah stopped.

Pronghorn bodies are made for speed and endurance. Their hearts, lungs and the tubes that carry oxygen to their lungs are two to four times larger than a similar-sized animal, like a goat. Their blood has lots of hemoglobin (HEE-mo-glow-bin) in it. Hemoglobin is what makes your blood red. Oxygen binds to hemoglobin, and the hemoglobin carries oxygen to the muscles. The more hemoglobin an animal has the more oxygen it can carry to its muscles and the faster its muscles can work.

Pronghorns' muscles are packed with many mitochondria (my- toe-KON-dree-a). Mitochondria are like power plants. They turn food into energy, so the more mitochondria a muscle has the faster it can work.

Even the pronghorns' legs are built to withstand rugged conditions. Their leg bones are twice as thick as a cow's leg bones! Thick bones let pronghorn sprint over rough land without breaking their legs.

These adaptations allow pronghorn to be the fastest mammal in North America. They have bursts of speed that are greater than 60 miles-per-hour, and they can sustain speeds of 30 to 45 miles-per-hour over long distances.

Some people wonder why a pronghorn would need to run so fast. After all, cheetahs don't live in North America. Well, they once did! Ancient pronghorns were hunted by cheetahs! Saber-toothed cats, lions and the American cheetah once roamed North America. Pronghorn would have been a tasty treat for those big cats. Pronghorn that were slow were eaten. Those that ran quickly got away. Nature selected fast pronghorn.

American cheetahs may be extinct, but pronghorn are still here with their bodies built for speed.



PRONGHORN IN HISTORY



Pronghorn Photo: CC-BY Idaho Fish and Game
Pronghorn Graphic: Vecteezy.com

Pronghorn fossils have been found in North America that are over one million years old. At one time, they were more common than bison. Scientists think that pronghorn once numbered about 40 million! They were the most common animal on the American plains.

Native Americans knew about pronghorn for hundreds of years; they hunted pronghorn. In the 1500s, the first outsiders saw pronghorn. They were members of Coronado's Spanish expedition. Three hundred years later, Lewis and Clark officially described pronghorn for science. William Clark shot a pronghorn on September 14, 1804 in South Dakota. Clark compared the look of the pronghorn to that of a sheep or antelope but called it a "goat." Meriwether Lewis called it an "antelope." A name still popular today.

Explorers and settlers killed pronghorn for meat and sport. As the west was settled, pronghorn were pushed out by towns, fields and roads. Ranchers built fences to keep cattle from roaming. Fences may be a pronghorn's worst

enemy. Often pronghorn don't see fences when they are running so quickly, and they do not like to jump fences. If they see a fence, they may try to crawl under it. More often than not, pronghorn became tangled in fences and were unable to escape. Only 20,000 pronghorn lived in the country in 1908.

People noticed that pronghorn needed some help. Pronghorn found shelter in early national parks and wildlife refuges. Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge was formed in Oregon on September 6, 1935. It is now called the Hart Mountain National Wildlife Refuge. One year later Nevada gave pronghorn a safe place to roam in the Charles Sheldon Antelope range. These places gave pronghorn the space and freedom to roam that they needed.

Today pronghorn are doing well. They can be hunted in many states, including Idaho. With people looking out for them, pronghorn should continue to roam the west.



UNGU-WHAT?

Pronghorn are ungulates (UN-gyu-lits).
Ungulate comes from the Latin word for hoof.
All ungulates have hooves.

Scientists used to group all ungulates together, but now they are divided into two groups. One group includes animals that have an odd number of toes. Horses are in this group. Animals in the other group have an even number of toes. Which group do you think pronghorn are in?

All ungulates are herbivores. They eat plants. Grasses, leaves and twigs are tough to eat. To help them digest plants, ungulates have stomachs divided into four different chambers or rooms.

When pronghorn eat, they nip off pieces from shrubs. They don't chew their food much before swallowing it. The food

goes into the first chamber of their stomachs. The first chamber is full of bacteria and other organisms that help break down the plants. Later, pronghorn spit up the food and chew it again. Have you ever heard of cows chewing their cud? They are chewing food regurgitated from their stomachs. Once chewed, the food passes into the second, third and fourth parts of their stomachs. Here water and nutrients are taken out of the food.

Having a stomach with many chambers not only allows animals to eat tough plants, it also helps to keep them safe. Many animals are at risk when they eat. Predators are more likely to see a deer eating in a clearing than hiding under a tree, so deer eat quickly. They nip off plants, chew them just a little and then swallow them. Once their first stomach is full, the deer finds a place to rest and hide. Now the deer can fully chew and digest their food, without having to constantly look out for danger. Don't ungulates have some amazing adaptations?

Pronghorn Photo: CC-BY James Brower at Idaho Fish and Game





BIGHORN SHEEP

HUMONGOUS HORNS



MOUNTAIN GOAT



PRONGHORN



BISON

Pronghorn, mountain goats, bison and bighorn sheep have horns. Horns are a bit different than antlers. Horns have two parts, a boney middle and an outer sheath. The inside part is bone that is attached to the skull. The outside of the horn, the sheath, is a covering made of a tough fiber-like material called keratin. Your fingernails and hair also contain keratin. What purpose does the sheath serve? It protects what's underneath!

Horns are permanent. In most cases, they continue to grow throughout an animal's life. Pronghorn are an exception to this rule. Pronghorn will shed and re-grow the sheath.

If you take a close look at most horns, you may see rings. Mountain goats' horns have rings around them. Counting the rings will tell you the age of the goat. Rings are formed each

year after the goat is one year old, so the horns of a mountain goat will have one less ring than its age.

How do you tell horns and antlers apart from each other? Antlers often look like tree branches with a main beam and points coming off of the beam. Horns are usually not branched like antlers; they are shaped similar to the letters "C," "J," and "L." One animal in Idaho has "C" shaped horns. It is found living on rocky cliffs. Can you guess which animal it is?

Mountain Goat Photo: CC-BY Patricia Henschen at Flickr.com

Pronghorn Photo: CC-BY #736277017 at Shutterstock.com

Bison Photo: Greg Miller at Flickr.com

Bighorn Sheep Photo: Baker County Tourism at Flickr.com



AWESOME ANTLERS

Antlers grow on members of the deer family. They are bones that grow out of the animal's skull. An antler grows faster than any other kind of bone. It can grow up to one inch a day during the summer! Usually only the males grow antlers, but female caribou can grow antlers. There is even a species of deer where neither the male nor female grow antlers. It's the Chinese water deer.

Antlers are light and easily damaged until late summer. While growing, they are covered with a thin skin called velvet. Velvet is covered with fine, short hairs and contains thousands of blood vessels. The blood vessels carry calcium and minerals needed for building strong bones. If a deer damages his antlers badly at this point, he could actually bleed to death! Once the antlers have grown, the blood vessels in the velvet close off. The velvet dries up and starts to fall off. By October or September, the velvet has been completely rubbed off by the deer. The



antlers are now hard and polished. Deer shed their antlers in the winter and then begin to grow another set.

Antlers are most often used to settle differences about territory, strength and to win mates. A deer that has a large set of antlers is likely to be strong and healthy. He would be regarded highly by other deer.



Winter Photo: Tiffany Washko at Flickr.com

WINTER IS COMING

Winter is a wonderful season for outdoor exploration. A blanket of new snow makes familiar places look quite different. Noisy streams become silent under ice and snow. Animals that you rarely see can now be “seen” when you find their tracks in the snow. Cold nips your cheeks and makes you look forward to a cup of hot chocolate after being outside.

Winter activities are many. Skiing and skating are great ways to enjoy winter. So are sledding, snowshoeing or ice fishing. Even if you do not have any equipment, you can still enjoy winter by just taking a walk in the snow. Build a snow fort with your friends or decorate your yard with snowmen. If it is snowing, catch some snowflakes on your gloves and use a magnifying glass to look at the beautiful crystals.

Take a walk after it snows to see what animal tracks you can find. Look for bird nests in the trees. If you live near a river or lake, watch for wintering bald eagles and ducks. Don't forget to check out the winter night sky. Cold, clear winter nights are the best for looking at stars.

No matter what kind of winter activity you enjoy, dressing properly is very important. Wear layers that you can take off when you warm up and put back on if you feel cold. Snow pants can help you stay warm and dry. Warm boots are very important for winter fun, and don't forget a hat and gloves. Wearing a hat is one of the best ways to stay warm, no matter what you are doing.

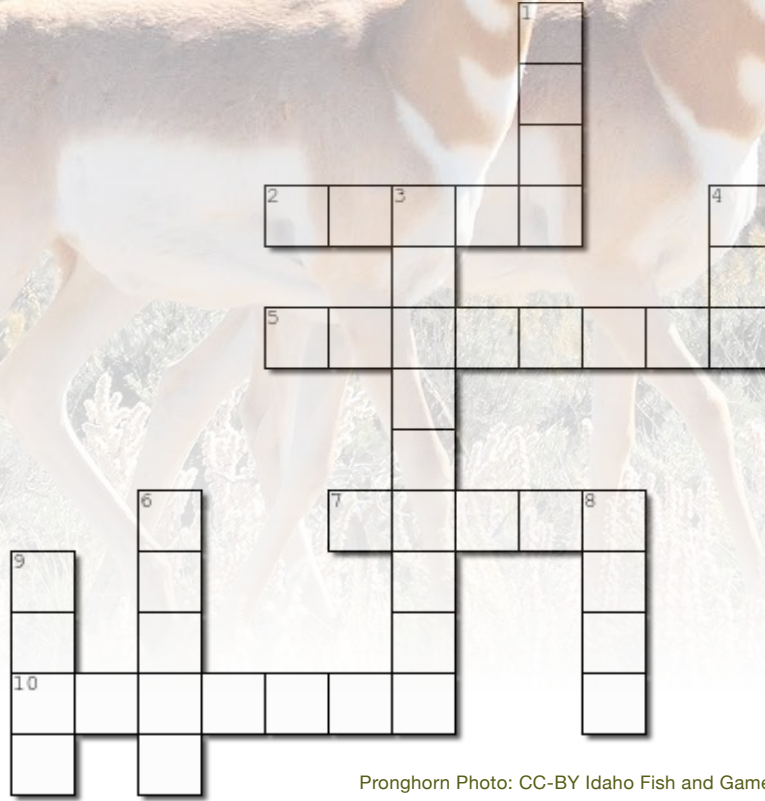
So, get into your winter clothes and head outside for some winter fun. After all, winter is a big part of every year in Idaho!

PRONGHORN PUZZLE



Word Bank

Bison
Buck
Cheetah
Doe
Fawn
Gray
Prong
Sagebrush
Speed
Ungulate



Pronghorn Photo: CC-BY Idaho Fish and Game

Created using the Crossword Maker on TheTeachersCorner.net

Across

2. Pronghorn used to be more common than this animal.
5. Pronghorn are part of this animal group.
7. This is sometimes found on a pronghorn's horn.
10. Pronghorn could outrun this animal in a long-distance race.

Down

1. The name for a baby pronghorn.
3. Pronghorns' main food source in the winter.
4. The name for a female pronghorn.
6. Pronghorn bodies are built for _____.
8. The color of a newborn pronghorn.
9. The name of a male pronghorn.

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WE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU!

If you have a letter, poem or question for Wildlife Express, it may be included in a future issue!

Send it to: adare.evans@idfg.idaho.gov

or

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